



## Newsletter Archives

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### The Great Sages of India Part I

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*Samsaara saagaram ghoramanantakleshabhaajanam  
Twaameyva saranam praapya nistaranti maneesheena"*

The above verse, featuring in the Jitamtestotra, means:

The wise, attaining to Thee alone the surest refuge, cross the terrible ocean of birth and death, the cause of endless pain and misery.

The fine fabric of Indian philosophy and culture has been brilliantly embellished with the stories of some of the greatest ever saints and sages Mother Earth ever created! The teachings of these Punya Atmas (great souls) have been the very foundation of our philosophical and spiritual heritage since time immemorial. But for these seers, our quest for moksha or even mukti (liberation) from mundane life would have been an impossible dream.

In the first part of this two-part series, we bring you inspiring life sketches of some of the most powerful saints and sages who dared to look ahead of their times and changed the whole society's outlook, thereby fulfilling their mission against all odds.

## Chaitanya Mahaprabhu



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**THE UNION OF RAMA AND  
KRISHNA WITH CHAITANYA  
MAHAPRABHU**

Chaitanya Mahaprabhu was one of the greatest revolutionist seers of his time. Born on the 4th of February, 1486 A.D. at Nabadwip, a district situated on the banks of the Ganges in West Bengal, Chaitanya went on to become a Vaishnava monk, also social reformer in Bengal and Orissa. Chaitanya propogated Bhakti Yoga (loving devotion to Lord Krishna) and based his entire philosophy on the Bhagavata Purana and the Bhagavad Gita. Worshipping the divine love of Radha and Krishna, he was the one who popularized the chant:

*"Hare Krishna Hare Krishna; Krishna Krishna Hare Hare  
Hare Rama Hare Rama; Rama Rama Hare Hare"*

Having a huge line of followers, referred to as Gaudiya Vaishnavas, Chaitanya was actually considered to be an avatar of Krishna in the aspect of Radharani, who, it was prophesized in the Bhagavata Purana, would reincarnate at a later point of time.

### **Chaitanya's birth**

Chaitanya was born to Pundit Jagannath Misra, alias Purandar Misra and Sachi Devi, both pious and hailing from a highly scholarly lineage. Chaitanya, born as Viswambar, was their tenth child. Eight daughters before him died soon after birth. The ninth child, Viswarup, had renounced the world at sixteen and entered a South Indian monastery. Chaitanya was given the nickname Nimai (Neem tree) in order to ward off all external evil influences.

### **Chaitanya as Gauranga**

Many neighbors christened him Gaur, Gaur-Hari and Gauranga, for his remarkable beauty and glowing countenance. "Gaur" here meant "fair" and "Anga" meant "body". They also called him Gaur-Hari because the name "Hari" always soothed the lad and made him smile even when he was very upset. Nothing could pacify baby Gauranga like Hari would!

### **Gauranga's boyhood**

Gauranga studied logic at Vasudev Sarvabhauma's school. Sarvabhauma was a very well-known professor of Nyaya. Gauranga showed a very keen intellect, which did not escape the notice of Radhunath, the brilliant author of a book on logic, called 'Didheeti'. Raghunath knew that the lad had a lot more intelligence and potential than his own teacher, Sarvabhauma. Raghunath secretly hoped to be known as the most learned man of his time. But when he saw Gauranga's sheer brilliance, the former lost faith in himself and developed a fear of the lad.

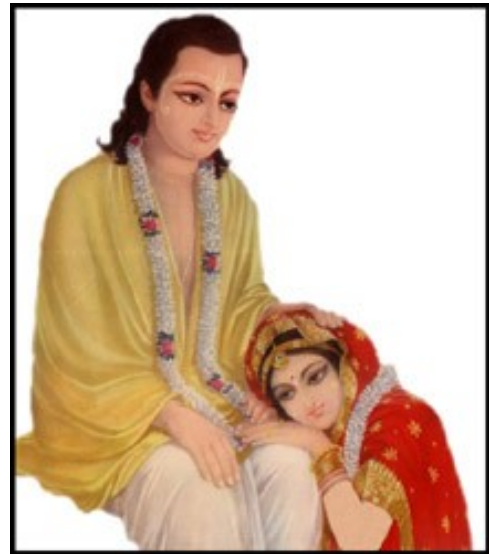
### **Gauranga's large-heartedness**

Gauranga, at that time, had written a manuscript on Nyaya, which Raghunath requested him to read out to him. As they were crossing the river by boat, the lad read it out to him. Raghunath realized that this was indeed the most scholarly exposition of Nyaya ever. Raghunath congratulated Gauranga on how good it was, but also told him how he had lost hopes that he would ever get to attain the first place in the world as professor on Nyaya. Without batting an eyelid, Gauranga immediately threw his own manuscript into the river, thereby allowing Didheeti to occupy the foremost position in the world of logic. Such was Gauranga's magnanimity even as a mere lad!

Very soon, Gauranga had mastered all aspects of Sanskrit and he even started a Tol or a school at the age of sixteen. In spite of his tremendous genius, he was always the kindest, gentlest and most compassionate human being one could ever know. He was a friend of the poor and the champion of the downtrodden. People just loved to be around him.

## Gauranga's youth

After his marriage to Lakshmi, Gauranga toured many districts of Bengal and soon won a great amount of recognition for his work. When Lakshmi died of a snake bite, he married Vishnupriya and continued to spread his vast knowledge among several pupils.



**SRI CHAITANYA MAHAPRABHU  
AND HIS WIFE LAKSHMIPRIYA**

## The turning point in Gauranga's life



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It was in the year 1509 that Gauranga left on a pilgrimage to Gaya along with his companions. Here, he met Isvar Puri, a Sanyasi of the Madhavacharya order and accepted him as his Guru. This veritably turned Gauranga's life around. He surrendered completely to Lord Krishna and lost all his pride in his own knowledge and wisdom. He would go on chanting, "Krishna, Krishna! Hari Bol, Hari Bol". In sheer ecstasy and bliss, he would jump about singing and dancing the name, laugh, cry and even roll on the ground. In such phases of pure bliss, he would neither eat nor drink - only contemplate the Lord.

On visiting the Gadadhar temple, Gauranga broke into the same feeling of bliss and begged of his Guru to liberate him from the ties of Samsara (the material world) and initiate him into Madhura Bhakti (loving devotion), just as Radha felt for her Krishna. He yearned to feel the deep and pure Prem (love) that Radha felt for her Lord and wished to drown in that prem-rasa.

### **SRI CHAITANYADEV WITH IDOL OF KRISHNA**

Isvar Puri then taught Gauranga a ten-lettered Mantra (prayer) invoking Krishna. This mantra filled the latter with total bliss. He lost all control of his emotions and gave up his entire self to the bhakti of Krishna. His sought Krishna's refuge and constantly sat in prayer, now laughing loudly, now shedding silent tears, entreating Krishna to shower His grace on him. Gauranga desired to visit Vrindavan, the abode of Krishna, but was forcibly stopped by his companions.

## Nitai

Nityananda alias Nitai was a Brahmin ascetic who too sought the divine presence of Krishna. Though he had toured Vrindavan, he could not find Krishna. When Gauranga met Nitai, there was an immediate bonding and the former invited the latter to his home. Gauranga considered him to be his lost brother, Viswarup.

Both Nitai and Gauranga would then arrange and head processions performing the Nama Sankirtana (singing the name) of Radha and Krishna. They would go dancing around the streets of Nabadwip, in pure joy. Gauranga was love incarnate. He breathed love and oozed pure love from every pore of his being. Though he gave very few discourses on bhakti, he set an example for people to follow. Even if he blessed a man by placing a hand on his head, that man would straightaway go into a blissful state of pure Prem and Samadhi. This attracted many folk around him and they would go along with his procession, chanting, "Hari Bol, Hari Bol".



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**NITAI GAUR SUBMERGED  
IN BHAKTI RASA OF KRISHNA**

## Gauranga takes Sanyas



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**VAISHNAVA DEVOTEES**

When Gauranga realized he was blessed with the divine presence and the capacity to bestow purity to one and all who came to visit him, he decided to take Sanyas and transform as many people as he possibly could. So at age twenty-four, Gauranga fought against the orthodoxy existing at that time and got himself initiated into Sanyasa under Swami Keshava Bharati. Now, Gauranga became known as 'Krishna Chaitanya'.

As a Sanyasi, Krishna Chaitanya observed all the rules strictly, being totally detached from the world and sacrificing all worldly pleasures for his one goal - Krishna. He even declined to

meet great kings as it was considered a sin for Sanyasis to meet the royal family. He lived a simple, sparse life, wearing the simplest of clothes, even sleeping on the bare floor.

Chaitanya became a great Vaishnavite preacher and he propagated Vaishnavism far and wide. He was helped in his mission by people such as Nityananda, Swarup Damodar, Advaitacharya, Sribas, Murari, Haridas, Gadadhar and some eminent others.

## Jagai and Madhai

Jagai and Madhai were brothers who were the worst ever sinners and criminals one could think of. Both of them also were Kotwals of Nabadwip. Though they were Brahmins, they involved themselves in all kinds of himsa (violence) one could envisage, including drinking, plundering and outraging the modesty of all women they ever fancied.

Chaitanya and Nitai prepared themselves to reclaim the brothers and make them realize the futility of their lives. They proceeded towards Jagai and Madhai's camp. On seeing Nitai singing and dancing the praises of the Lord, an incensed Madhai hit him with the broken neck of an earthen jar, which left a huge, gaping wound on Nitai's head. Jagai, the softer of the two brothers, remonstrated Madhai for attacking a Sanyasi.

Seeing this, Chaitanya gratefully hugged Jagai for his support, who instantly went into a trance of ecstasy. Madhai understood his folly and prostrated in front of both Chaitanya and Nitai, seeking their pardon. When Nitai hugged him, he too went into a trance like his brother. They both later became saints of high order. Together, they also prepared a bathing Ghat at Nabadwip, which is still referred to as the 'Madhai Ghat'.

### **The Washerman**

Chaitanya once came across a washerman who was busy beating clothes to clean them. When he asked the washerman to utter the word, 'Hari Bol', he initially refused. But once he started, he could not stop himself and started chanting 'Hari Bol' and danced around in sheer bliss. This alarmed his wife, who alerted the village folk on the goings on. When some villagers tried to take hold of him, they too got transformed and starting chanting and dancing themselves! Such was the sway Chaitanya had over people - he could transform them and give them mukti with just a glance and a loving smile!

### **Pilgrimages and trips to holy shrines**

Chaitanya and Nitai undertook many pilgrimages to Orissa and Puri and then toured the South extensively. They visited Tirupati, Kancheepuram, Srirangam, Madurai, Rameshwaram and, finally, Kanyakumari. They also went to Pandharpur, Nasik and Udipi. Fulfilling his greatest desire to visit Vrindavan, he bathed in the Yamuna and filled himself even more with the divine energy there.

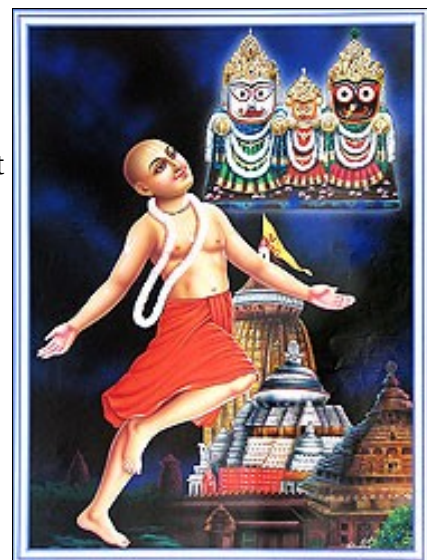
Chaitanya then decided to settle down in Puri, where he stayed on till Samadhi. He performed many miracles there too.

### **Miracles at Puri**

During the time of Car Festival (pulling of the chariot) of Lord Jagannath (an aspect of Krishna) at the Puri temple, devotees could not move the chariot no matter how hard they tried. Even several elephants trying to pull it could not succeed. Chaitanya pushed the car lightly and, to the devotees' utter delight, it began to move immediately.

Sarvabhauma Bhattacharya, a learned scholar of Vedanta, also had a huge ego and great pride in himself. He did not have much of an opinion about Chaitanya and thought of him as a mad mendicant. But when he came face to face with the latter, he was struck by his deep knowledge of Sanskrit, bhakti and the great love he emanated. Instantly humbled, Sarvabhauma got converted and became Chaitanya's ardent disciple.

Vasudeva was a simple Brahmin who was excommunicated by society as he suffered from leprosy. Compassionate as



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**CHAITANYA MAHAPRABHU  
AT THE PURI JAGANNATH TEMPLE**

he was, Chaitanya went up to him and lovingly embraced him. In the very next second, Vasudeva healed and became completely normal! Such was the healing power of his love.

Pundit Sreebas was one of the foremost devotees of Chaitanya. (The Chaitanya Bhagavata, a Biography on Chaitanya, was written by his grandson.) A Kirtan party was held at Sreebas' residence that day. Chaitanya and his followers were singing and dancing in great joy. Unknown to them, Sreebas' grandson had died of cholera just then. Though his wife was broken, Sreebas chose to join the Kirtan and continued dancing, unaffected by the tragedy that had struck him. When Chaitanya came to know about the death, he asked for the boy's body to be brought in front of him. When he commanded it to speak, the boy's soul immediately entered the body and stated that he had departed to a wonderful world and that he was happy being there now. This left the bereaved family feeling assured and even blessed.

Nitai, Sarvabhauma and Ramananda Ray had the privilege of witnessing the sheer divinity of Chaitanya. Chaitanya is said to have revealed himself to them as a six-handed divine being, two hands wielding the bow and arrow, two playing the flute and the other two holding a Danda and Kamandalu (staff and pot). With this manifestation, he was indicating that he was both Rama and Krishna.

Chaitanya once dived into the sea at Puri, imagining it to be the Yamuna at Vrindavan. As he floated on the water, he happened to be caught by a fisherman, who, sensing the weight of his catch, was very happy thinking he had caught a huge fish. Meanwhile, Ramananda and Swaroopa, who were desperately searching for their master, found him lying unconscious beside the fisherman and brought him to, by repeatedly singing the name of 'Hari'.

### **Chaitanya's last days**

Chaitanya kept chanting the Lord's name and got more and more deeply into spiritual contemplation and propagation of Bhakti Yoga. He became even more humble as he chanted:

*"Oh beloved Lord, I do not seek wealth, fame or followers. I do not seek knowledge or poetic genius. May my pure love and Bhakti for Thee continue whenever I come back again to life on this Earth."*

With these words, Chaitanya attained Samadhi on the 14th of June, 1533.

### **Chaitanya's legacy**

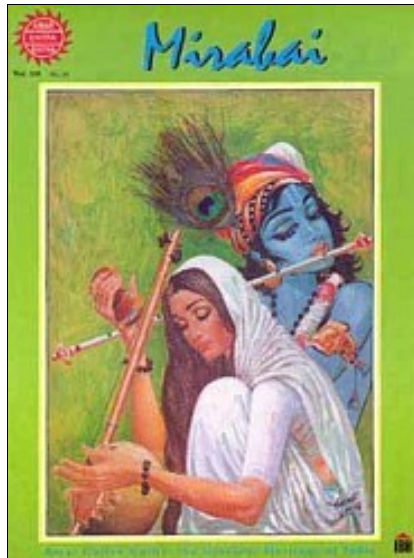
In the 20th Century, Chaitanya Mahaprabhu's teachings breathed life and verve through the untiring efforts of A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, the founder of The International Society for Krishna Consciousness. In the present 21st Century, this very Vaishnavite attitude on Bhakti Yoga is still being studied through the formal medium of what is known as Krishnology.

Even today, Chaitanya is worshipped as an avatar of Krishna in many parts of Bengal. One can find sculptures of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu in many major Radha Krishna temples of the world. Chaitanya is also considered by some to have influenced the Baul movement of folk singers in Bengal.

## Meerabai

"Mere To Giridhar Gopala Doosro Na Koyi"

"It is only Giridhar Gopala who matters to me, no one else"



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**MEERABAI  
THE MYSTICAL POETESS**

Thus sang Mirabai, yet another mystical poetess, whose tremendous love and devotion to Krishna surpassed all human boundaries and limitations. Mira, who is regarded by many as an incarnation of Radha (Krishna's divine partner) herself, was born in the year 1499 in the small hamlet of Kurkhi, situated near Merta, a tiny state in Marwar, Rajasthan. Meera's father, Ratan Singh Ranthor, was a proud Rajput and a great devotee of Vishnu. Hence Mira was brought up in a very Vaishnavite environment, which largely influenced her bhakti towards Krishna.

### Little Meera

Right from her childhood, Meera showed an inclination towards being religious. She was particularly fond of Lord Krishna. Once, when she saw a marriage procession passing by in front of her home, little Meera was utterly fascinated. She gaped in amazement at the sight of a very well-dressed groom, seated on the horse, the baraat (joyous wedding procession) following him, singing and dancing away. She ran inside and asked her mother, "Dear Mother, who shall be my bridegroom?"

Her mother smiled at her indulgently and in jest, pointed out the idol of Sri Krishna which she had given to her earlier. This created a deep impression in the young mind of Meera, who began loving the idol more and more with each passing day. She would spend all her time with the idol, talk to it, sing and dance with it, keep it by her bedside at night and so on.

Gradually, she started composing and singing beautiful bhajans (prayer songs) in the name of Krishna.

### Meera's wedding

When Meera came of age, her father arranged her marriage to the mighty Rana Kumbha of Chitore district in Mewar. Though never interested in worldly affairs, Meera would dutifully obey her husband, act as per his wishes and, after finishing her household duties, would go back to the little Krishna idol she had placed in her own temple and sing and dance in front of it. Krishna would actually step out of the idol, embrace her and play the flute for her - such was her supreme devotion to Him!

Meanwhile, Meera's mother-in-law and sister-in-law did not like the way Meera behaved in her marital home. The primary bone of contention was that Meera had refused to worship the family deity, Durga (an aspect of Shakti) and went about singing and dancing the praises of Lord Krishna instead, that too, in full public view. She would dance with the members of any caste or creed and that incensed them further. Meera's sister-in-law, Udabai, tried to slander her reputation in front of the Rana, but Meera was always saved from disrepute. She was accused of behaving loosely with the Sadhus visiting the temple but she never once cared

about public opinion and continued with her worship as always.

Once, the Rana happened to break into the temple when Meera was animatedly talking to her Krishna idol. When he demanded to know who this mysterious lover of hers was, she simply pointed to the idol and said, "Here is my lover, my Chitchor, the one who has stolen my heart and soul!"

### **Meera suffers persecution**

The Rana and his relatives tried to persecute Meera in various ways. But in all cases, Meera was always protected by her Lord, Krishna's, grace. In one instance, the Rana sent her a closed basket, with an accompanying message that it contained a flower garland for her Krishna. In actuality, it contained a vicious cobra, all coiled and poised for attack. When Meera roused from her deep meditation and opened the basket, however, she was amazed to find a lovely idol of Krishna and a beautiful, fragrant garland of flowers inside it.

The Rana, ashamed at having failed once, determined never to give up and sent her a bowl of poison, saying that it contained sweet nectar. Gratefully, Meera first offered the bowl to Krishna's idol and then drank it as Prasad. Miraculously, the poison had actually turned into real nectar, leaving Meera totally unaffected and actually energizing her further!

The Rana then got a bed of nails made for her. But when Meera went to recline on it, the sharp nails had suddenly transformed into soft, fragrant rose petals!

Distressed at her husband's demeanor towards her, Meera wrote to saint Tulsidas and asked for his advice on what her further course of action should be. She talked of her deep love for Krishna and that she could never even think of deserting her Giridhar Gopal. Tulsidasji immediately replied to her, assuring her that she was traveling the right path and asked her to refrain from being attached to her family. He further asked her to traverse the very path of spirituality she had chosen as her goal to salvation.

### **Akbar and Tansen visit Meera**

Stories of Meera's devotion spread far and wide and reached the ears of the great Moghul King, Akbar. Akbar, along with his court musician, Tansen, decided to visit Meera in disguise. Her mellifluous voice and undoubted devotion moved Akbar so much that he touched her holy feet and placed an invaluable emerald necklace at her feet. When the Rana came to know of it, he was absolutely livid at what he interpreted as being Meera's loose conduct. He ordered her to drown herself in the river, as she was a disgrace to his family and unfit to even show her face to the world.

Meera meekly obeyed her husband yet again and proceeded towards the river. She was least affected even by the fear of death and sang and danced joyfully on the way to the river, chanting, "Govind, Gopal, Giridhar". When she was about to enter the river, however, a hand grasped her from behind. She turned and lo and behold! Standing there before her on the banks of the river was her very Lord, Giridhar Gopal, resplendent, a beautiful smile playing



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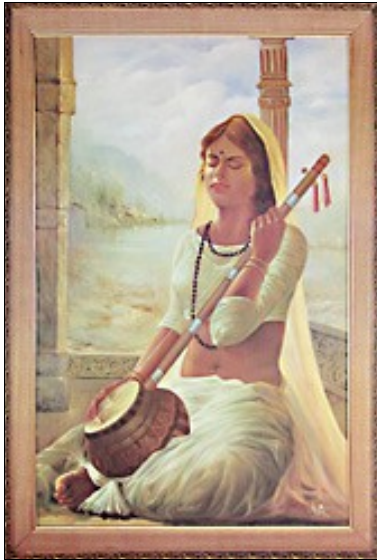
**MEERABAI LOST IN  
DEVOTION OF KRISHNA**



on His lips!

She fainted in her Lord's arms and when she came to, He lovingly told her, "Your worldly life is over, dear Meera. Now you are free of the fetters of Samsara. Now you are Mine. So stop being distressed and come to visit me at the beautiful Vrindavan. Waste no time, My child. Come to Me, I await you." So saying, Krishna disappeared from the scene.

### **Meera undertakes a pilgrimage**



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#### **THE ASCETIC MEERABAI IN VRINDAVAN**

Leaving behind the luxuries of the palace, Meera traveled barefoot over most of Rajasthan. She was always received with great enthusiasm and respect to whichever village she went. Many became her faithful followers.

When Meera reached Vrindavan, she found her favorite Govinda Mandir there, which is to date considered a holy place of pilgrimage. She would beg for alms and spend the rest of her time worshipping her Lord at the temple. Her fame spread all over Rajasthan and people revered her for her purity and immense love for Krishna. Rana Kumbha himself visited her in the disguise of a sanyasi. When he saw how pure and pious she really was, he was put to shame and repented his past cruel deeds. Meera recognized her husband and, in all humility, immediately fell at his feet.

### **Jiva Gosain**

Jiva Gosain, the head of Vaishnavites at Vrindavan, initially refused audience to Meerabai, arrogantly stating that he would never allow a woman to come before him. Meera retorted to this, saying, "I had thought that the only Purusha in Vrindavan is Krishna and all the others were women. Today I know there is another Purusha besides Krishna." Gosain was immediately humbled and, realizing what a holy person Meera was, immediately visited her and paid his respects to her.

### **Meerabai takes Samadhi**

It is popular belief that when Meerabai entered the Krishna temple at Dwarka, she went into a state of pure ananda (bliss) and started joyously singing and dancing His name. Continuing thus, she entered the sanctum sanctorum. Legend has it, that the sanctum doors closed by themselves and when they re-opened, Meera's sari was seen enwrapped around the Lord's idol, symbolizing the Divine Communion of Meera's soul with the Divine.



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#### **MEERABAI UNITES WITH KRISHNA**

## **Why is Meera so celebrated?**

What was it that made Meerabai stand out from the thousands of other Sanyasis and Sanyasins? Of course, she was good looking, had a great voice, sang beautifully and composed moving poems on her Ishtadevata (favorite God), Krishna. But so did so many other saints and sages. What, then, made Meera so famous?

Meera had totally surrendered to her Lord. He was everything to her. She saw Krishna in all things - animate and inanimate, ate with Krishna, conversed with Him, slept beside Him, sang and danced His praises, why, even breathed the name, Krishna! She drank deeply from the nectar that was Krishna prema rasa. Her all-encompassing love for her Gopal is what gave her this exalted status as one of the most spiritual saints ever, in Indian history.

Meera's story is the story of human grit and will - it depicts the very struggle of the Jivatma (mortal Self) to attain the Paramatma (the Immortal Supreme). Even today, her wonderful songs instill faith and courage in the meek and the submissive. Her tremendous spiritual strength and absolute faith in Krishna had granted her complete poise and balance through all her life's circumstances. She had taken the good with the bad, being a Sthita Pragnya (not internally affected by any circumstance, be it happy or sad).

## **Meerabai and Chaitanya Mahaprabhu**

Meera followed the Raganuga or Ragatmika bhakti marga (path). She cared not for public opinion and never indulged in Sadhana bhakti (ritualistic worship). She knew nothing about the Vedas or the Shastras - all that she ever yearned for was Krishna and His divine presence.

Like Gauranga, Meera too followed the path of madhura bhakti. Krishna was her all - her father, mother, friend, husband and Lord. Anyone that came near Meera, would be deeply affected by her pure, innocent love. Her voice was sweet, her words, compassionate and kind. Her discourses were powerful and kindled the dormant spiritual self awake in one and all listening to them. Meerabai was indeed the best example of pure, unselfish love and self-surrender.

## **Meerabai's previous life**

There is an interesting story that endeavors to explain just how Meera came to love Krishna to such an extent. The Hindu Pantheon believes in the concept of rebirth and stipulates that everyone that is born on Earth, comes with a Karma of his past life, attached to him. This Karma is what creates several Vaasanas, subconscious inclinations which are the conglomerate results of impressions created through samskaras or experiences in one's Purva Janma (past life). These Vaasanas, in turn affect one's present life and are responsible for their peculiar traits and behavior patterns in this Janma.

Meerabai, this legend relates, was born in Mathura in her previous birth. At a very tender age, she was married off to a boy from Nandavrajam. Everyone kept telling her, "At Nandavrajam, there is yet another boy called Bala Krishna, who holds powerful sway over all the residents. All of them are completely under his control and will do whatever he asks them to do, even leave their families for him." Everyone kept warning her and asked her to be careful at Nandavrajam. After her traditional bidai (ceremony before leaving her parents' home), she was seated in a beautiful palanquin which was to take her to her marital home.

On their way to Vrajam, the entourage encountered heavy rains with thunder and menacing bolts of lightning coming down directly at them. The palanquin bearers deserted Meera and fled for their lives. Not quite knowing what to do next, Meera took a peek from the palanquin

window. The sight before her amazed her beyond words ...



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### **KRISHNA LIFTS GIRI GOVARDHAN**

This was the day when Indra (king of the Devas or Gods) had decided to vent his anger on the Vraja-vaasis (residents), as they ignored Him and propitiated Krishna instead. Meera saw Little Krishna effortlessly lift the gigantic Govardhana Giri (mountain) with the little finger of His left hand and protect all the residents, even the tiniest creatures of Vraja, by asking them to get under the mountain for cover.

This image of Govardhana Giridhara got totally imprinted in her young mind. Meera was awe-struck and could not take her eyes off the Lord. Suddenly, a huge boulder fell on her and killed

her on the spot. Though Meera died then, the avyakta madhura bhakti (the love that surpassed all boundaries of description or expression) that she was suffused with at the time of her death was so intense, that she carried that on to her next life as Meerabai.

Interestingly, all Meera bhajans end with the Makuta (signature), "Giridhar Gopal".

## **Shirdi Sai Baba**

*"Om Digambaraaya Vidmahey  
Avadhutaaya Dheemahi  
Tanno Sai Prachodayaat"*

The above is the first among the Ekadasa (eleven) Sai Gayathri mantras of Shirdi Sai Baba, which means:

Om, may we know the Digambara  
To know Him, may we meditate on Avadhuta  
For that, may Sai guide us towards achieving that goal.

Shirdi Sai Baba, also referred to as the Sai Baba of Shirdi, was an Indian yogi, guru and fakir, who both Hindus and Muslims as a saint of high spiritual standing. Some Hindus actually consider him to be the incarnation of Dattatreya, one aspect of Lord Shiva, one of the Divine Trinity. Yet others considered him to be the highest satguru and an incarnation of Sant Kabir.



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**SAI BABA**

The name, "Sai Baba" is a curious mix of Persian and Indian origin. Sai in Persian means the "holy one", a term which applies to Islamic ascetics and saints. Baba, in many Indian languages, usually means "father". Put together, thus, "Sai Baba" would stand for "holy father".

## Sai Baba's History

Shirdi Sai Baba's history, his birth, upbringing and so on are very obscure. The only thing scholars agree on is that the saint existed from around the mid-19th to the 20th Century. A fakir had one day materialized, seemingly out of nowhere and took shelter in a mosque at Shirdi, a small village in Maharashtra, India. The youth, about 16 years old, had a resplendent face and eyes that seemed to look through one's soul. He never moved around or spoke much. Initially, the residents of the village offered him food to eat. By and by, the villagers developed a rapport with Baba, who gave spiritual discourses and gave solutions to many of their problems.

Sai Baba preached Advaita (that all are one with God) and his teachings covered the tenets of both Hinduism and Islam. Interestingly, the mosque he lived in was actually buried within a Hindu temple. Sai, as he was lovingly addressed, celebrated both Hindu and Muslim festivals and used both the religions' symbolisms in his teachings. One of his famous epigrams was, "Allah Malik" (God is the Ultimate Master). Sai Baba taught the tenets of love, harmony, contentment, charity, forgiveness and devotion towards the Guru. His other famous epithet was, "Shraddha aur Saburi" (faith and patience).

Sai Baba is also venerated by religious masters of the Sufi tradition. Even some of his disciples have attained fame as great spiritual leaders of their time.

## Sai's birth

The Sai never liked anyone querying about his birth and parentage. But some historical evidence leads to the fact that he might have been born as Haribhai Bhausari. He is said to have revealed to Mhalsapati, a priest at the Khandoba temple in Shirdi and one of his close disciples, that he was born in a Brahmin family in the village of Pathri, but had been entrusted in the hands of a fakir right from infancy.

Yet another time, he claimed that from the age of twelve, the wife of the fakir sent him to live with a Hindu Guru called Venkusa of Selu. That could probably explain how Baba could so easily so effortlessly and effectively combine the principles of both Hinduism and Islam.

## The disappearance of Baba from Shirdi



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**SAI BABA BENEATH THE NEEM TREE**

Though no one knows the exact date of when Sai Baba stepped into Shirdi, most scholars agree that he was around sixteen years old at the time. The Sai Satcharita, a holy book on the life of Sai, relates that the villagers had been awe-struck with the radiant presence of a young boy seated beneath a neem tree, absorbed in deep meditation. He reacted not to the changes in the climate and showed no fear even when some young boys in the village thought him to be mad and threw stones at him.

Baba stayed on for about three years, by which time he had earned a special place in the hearts of all the residents of the village. But he suddenly left Shirdi and disappeared for a period of time and reappeared just as suddenly in the year 1858. He returned to the village with Chand Patil's wedding procession. From then on, he lived in Shirdi permanently, leading an ascetic life, continuing to give

spiritual discourses to all his devotees and even healing many ailing people and making them well again.

It was only after his return that Sai reportedly switched to wearing a kafni (knee-length white robe) and a typical fakir-like turban on his head. This Sufi attire was probably what had sparked off an initial resentment towards him from the Hindu residents of Shirdi.

### **Sai started residing in a mosque**

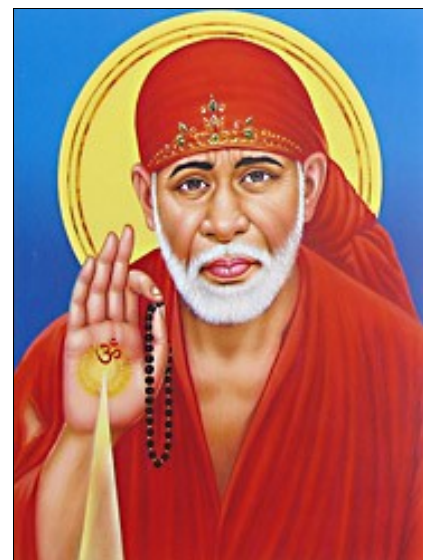
Ever after his return, Sai just withdrew into his shell, was uncommunicative and was almost always in meditation. Quite often, he would just wander around in the jungles around Shirdi. Eventually, his followers persuaded him on staying in a dilapidated masjid (mosque). He survived on the alms he received from the residents. He also lit a sacred fire inside the mosque which burned all day and night long, from which he would hand over the holy Udi (ash) to one and all of his visitors. The Udi was believed to have healing and protective powers. This dhuni is maintained to date at Dwarkamai in Shirdi.

Sometimes, Sai would arrange a community lunch for all the residents and prepare the food himself, from the alms he received from everyone else. He would sing and dance to religious songs, mostly verses of Kabir. He believed in celebrating both Hindu and Muslim festivals with extreme fervor. But his behavior was noted to be weird at times, breaking into unnecessarily high tempers, shouting and screaming at some of his followers for no apparent reason. But it was believed that he behaved in that manner because he was upset at the way someone suffered for another's wrongdoings. Sai Baba was said to have supernatural powers and could see events taking place in even the remotest of places.

### **Leelas (Miracles) of Sai Baba**

There are records of Sai Baba performing many Miracles on his devotees during his lifetime. He used to read his devotees' minds, manifest in more than one place at the same time, perform exorcisms, cure the critically ill, even raise people from death. While many devotees talked about these Miracles, many even recorded them in books. Sai Baba used to wield Yogic powers extraordinaire. He could levitate and even enter a state of clinical death when he had to manifest in some other remote place. Some devotees claim to have seen Baba perform Khanda Yoga, that is, detach the limbs or intestines of his own body and then reattach them.

He would also appear in his devotees' dreams and guide them on their future course of action. In some cases, he would appear in physical form or as visions to people who had not ever heard of him before, and then ask them to visit him at Shirdi.



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**SAI BABA - THE ALL POWERFUL**

The following are a few of the most popular Miracles that Baba performed:

### **Lighting of lamps with water**

Sai Baba used to love to light lamps in his place of residence. He used to rely on the generosity of Shirdi's grocers to supply him with the oil he needed to light the little earthen lamps. But one day, the grocers tired of his constant demand and refused to give him the oil, saying they were running short of the supply. Sai calmly walked back to his masjid, filled the lamps with water and lighted them. Lo and behold! Each and every lamp shone brightly, all the way till the wee hours of the morning. The grocers were immediately humbled and apologized profusely for the sin they had committed against him. Baba forgave them immediately, but only after making them promise they would never lie again in their lives!

### **Precognition of fields burning**

Once, the harvesting season was done in Shirdi and all the foodgrains had been locked up in a yard. Sai Baba called for Kondaji Sutar and warned him that his field had caught fire. On hurrying back to his field, Sutar saw nothing amiss and reported the same to Baba. Sai Baba insisted that there was indeed a fire and when he headed back to the field this time, Sutar saw a sheaf of corn on fire, high winds dangerously fuelling it. When he and the villagers prayed to Sai for protection, he walked into the field casually, sprinkled some water on the burning area and ordered the fire to die down. To the amazement of all those present there, the fire died down peacefully, without leaving even a trace of its presence earlier!

### **Aborting the storm and rains**

Rao Bahadur Moreshwar Pradhan and his family had come to Shirdi to visit Sai. The day there were slated to leave, there were high stormy winds in the air and it started pouring heavily. Rao was alarmed and dismayed. Sai Baba looked at the heavens and prayed, "Merciful Allah, stop the rains, else my children will not be able to head home safely!" The storm immediately abated, letting Rao undertake his journey and reach home safe and sound.

### **Creating water supply in a dry well**

Sai Baba had planned on celebrated the Rama Navami festival in a big way, letting the villagers have a big mela (fair) marking the event. The problem, though, was the existing water supply would not be enough for everyone. Baba pointed to an old, dried up well, gave them a plate containing some flowers, prasad and some alms he had received that morning and asked them to drop it in the well. The minute they had done so, pure, sparkling water rose from the well and filled it to capacity!

### **The Godavari flows from Sai's divine Feet!**

One of Sai Baba's top followers, Das Ganu, had expressed a desire to his master to go visit a place called Singba situated on the banks of the Godavari river. Baba, though, had told him several times that Ganu would seek the Godavari right at his (Baba's) feet. But Das Ganu did not have enough faith to believe what Sai said. He then asked Ganu to place his palms at his (Sai's) feet. As he did so, Ganu was amazed to see water flowing out of his master's feet and filling his palms with it. Humbled, he bowed down at Baba's feet, sprinkled some of the tirtha (holy water) on his head and distributed it among the rest of the villagers.

### **Sai stirs food with his hands**

There were many instances when villagers were witness to an awe-inspiring sight. Baba would be preparing food in the masjid and he would be stirring the concoction not with a ladle, but with his own bare hands!

## Sai attains Samadhi



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### SAI BABA - THE IMMORTAL

Sai Baba's story spread far and wide and he had devotees coming to him from all over India. On October 15, 1918, Sai decided to attain Mahasamadhi. At precisely 2:30pm, he lay on the lap of one of his devotees and left his mortal body. He hardly had any possessions with him and died just as he had lived - like a true fakir. In accordance with his wish, he was buried at "Buty Wada". There is a temple built at that very spot, commonly referred to as the Samadhi Mandir.

### Sai Baba's teachings

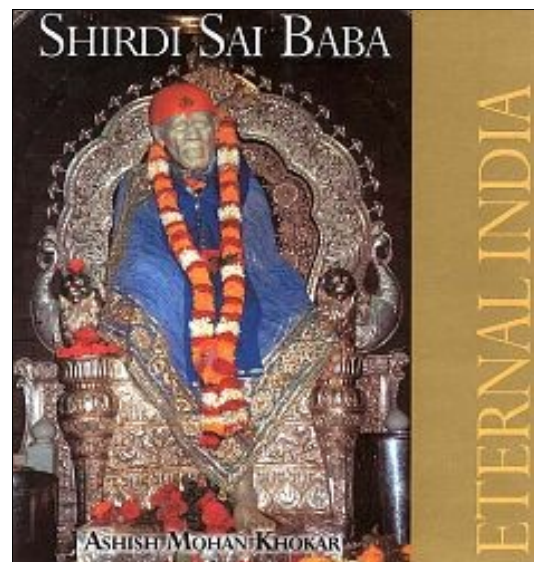
Sai Baba maintained no written records of his teachings. His teachings consisted of short, pithy sayings, sometimes even vague, cryptic messages that would be difficult to decode and grasp fully. He would ask for money from the devotees, which he would later give away to the poor and needy. Many devotees saw this as Sai's act to rid the devotees of their attachment to the material world. Baba encouraged acts of charity and advised all his devotees to be generous while helping people in need. He asked them to offer food to the hungry and clothing to those who could not afford to buy them.

Yet another of Sai Baba's favorite sayings was, "Why fear when I am here". To this day, Baba's devotees believe that they are always protected from sin and external dangers as long as they remain to have Shraddha and Saburi in him and his doings!

## Shirdi today

Sai Baba had promised that he would continue to live, bless his devotees and protect them even after he had left this mortal world. He had also said that he would guide one and all who took refuge in him and that no one would ever leave Shirdi empty-handed or in distress. Devotees from all over the world, from a multitude of faiths and religions, including Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Christians and Zoroastrians, still throng Shirdi to date, with full faith and devotion in Baba. Homi Bhabha and Nana Palkhivala were prominent Shirdi Sai devotees, who averred that Sai Baba was the only non-Zoroastrian who commanded so much influence over Zoroastrians.

The Shri Saibaba Sansthan Trust, which is based at Shirdi, is most active and conducts daily aartis with full fervor and devotion. It is said that these rituals are carried out by the descendants of the very families that took care of Sai when he was physically present at Shirdi. Tens of thousands of pilgrims pour into Shirdi each day to offer their love and devotion to the holy saint-seer.



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### SHIRDI SAI BABA

## **The global Shirdi Sai movement**

The Shirdi Sai movement has now spread across many countries of the world, such as the United States of America, the Carribean, Australia, Malaysia, Singapore and many other sub-continent of the world.

## **Conclusion of Part 1**

With this, we end the first of our two-part series on the Great Saints and Sages in India. We promise to bring you yet some more interesting stories and anecdotes in our second section.

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This article was written by **Saipriya Viswanathan**. Saipriya is a teacher/performer of Bharata Natyam, Carnatic vocal music and Carnatic Veena. She is a recipient of several awards for both dance and music, including the Sur Mani and Singar Mani titles. She is a recipient Govt. of India Merit Scholarship for dance and is a diploma holder in Carnatic vocal music.

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